

Introducing the Early Show

By Constance De Jong

Forty-one video works on tape are being shown in *The Early Show: Video from 1969-1979*. A collection of ephemera accompanying the works imparts something of the tone and texture of the period. And with a similar interest in portraying the time of video's introduction, here, in the catalogue, are collected interviews with the artists featured in the show. These texts, with their distinct voices, are a primary source of information introducing us to individual works and to some of the ideas and activities that distinguish the moment when video was emerging in the visual arts.

It is an extended moment (1969-1979) during which video took many forms—as single channel work, installation, an element of live performance, and as the work of video collectives. *The Early Show* concentrates on single channel video by New York-based artists. A diverse group is being presented under that broad heading. Yet nearly everyone in the exhibition uses the word *immediacy* to express one of early video's most compelling features: the instantaneous feedback of a moving image.

This never-before-seen phenomenon was something of a marvel—as remarkable as it was stimulating as it was culturally profound. With the arrival of portable equipment in the mid-1960s, video technology became accessible outside the confines of the television industry transmission facilities. One by one, artists brought the new technology into their studios where video making became a practice executed with the immediacy of drawing or painting. This was accomplished by artists connecting the camera-recorder unit to a television monitor where the acts of seeing and doing became simultaneous.

The early portable camera, largely intended for on-location shooting (news), required the operator to see the subject through a viewfinder held next to the eye. Utilizing the monitor as a viewing device was a way around this aspect of the camera. Additionally, composing on a monitor meant producing a work in the precise scale, aspect ratio and form of a television screen on which eventually the work would be viewed in exhibition.

Though numerous companies introduced portable video units at the same time, we tend to memorialize the Portapak, Sony's portable video equipment marketed in 1965, as synonymous with early video. Its role is remembered by Dara Birnbaum: "I don't think the moment comes simply from a Portapak. There has to be a fertile bed and then something feeds it and ignites it. The cast off of the industry could be that." No piece of equipment or new technology is the source of art, of course. Technology is ever a close companion to all art-making and the advent of the portable video unit is but a more recent and datable event than more remote appearances of other tools used by artists. The television monitor as a means for making and presenting an art form was difficult for some people to accept. Unlike a canvas or sheet of paper, a television is not benign. Whether we are referring to an institution or an object in a room, television is inscribed with multiple identities: boob tube, capitalist tool, household furniture, domestic appliance. It is both technological achievement and cultural wasteland. Now, in addition, this controversy-generating icon was being identified with art.

Among the varying agendas, aesthetics and experiments that appear in *The Early Show*, one strategy—the stationary camera—is common to nearly all the works. The camera remains still and pictures with motion or movement of any kind occurs within the fixed image frame. An iconic, unified plane is reinforced; it has frontality and frequently time is uninflated, producing an extended sense of duration. Rarely did artists set the camera in motion or employ the vocabulary of camera shots favored by the film industry. Early video's still, long takes are positioned on the far side of film's narrative ploys and television's relentless image flow.

A share of the dance, writing, music and experimental film being produced at the time was setting aside conventional narrative devices and time structures. A different set of values was being advanced, often by shaping a form's inherent sequential nature into simple succession, one thing after another with equal stress on every gesture of a dance, frame of a film, individual notes of a musical composition and words of a text. Video, likewise, plotted a separate course from any number of conventions intended to invoke events in a temporal setting: the sense of development and resolution determined by narrative formula, and the sense of covering a terrain by mapping familiar emotional and psychological signposts. The forward-moving steady pace of much early video typifies video-makers' exploration and invention of a sense of time independent of the long-held regard for beginning, middle, end segmentation and the expectation that a time-based work go somewhere. Durational time invokes a continuous present that builds by accretion. The durational action of much early video renders a visual sequencing that a viewer can enter at any moment and find their place—effectively structuring works for exhibition or gallery viewing, very different from works intended to be seen start to finish in programmed screenings. In the words of video artist Les Levine: "The work is boring if you demand that it be something else. If you demand that it be itself then it is not boring."

Portability and immediacy—signature features of the new video technology—are of little value unless there is equipment availability. Renting from commercial video rental facilities was an alternative to the daunting \$3,000 purchase price of a Portapak, as was borrowing from universities and colleges that had purchased portable equipment early on—notably psychology, communications and other non-art departments. At the request of artists in his gallery, Leo Castelli acquired an early Portapak in 1968 for their shared use, and by 1970, individual artists were purchasing portable video units enabling the solitary practice of making art in the studio.

Equipment availability was a chance and crucial event in the work of Carlota Schoolman, one of the first independent producers of artists' video. Like the artists in *The Early Show*, Schoolman was interviewed to access particular aspects of video's appearance in the visual arts.

Carlota Schoolman interviewed on December 8, 2005: When Ralph Hocking started to teach at SUNY Binghamton in the late 1960s, one of the things he did very quickly was to start an organization called the Experimental Television Center. He immediately bought several Portapaks. Almost everybody else was just learning that there was something called the Portapak and Ralph buys twenty of them. He never did anything small. His idea was to give them to his students as a kind of loan. His way of teaching was to say: see what you can do.

Then Ralph showed up with a Portapak at 379 West Broadway where I lived. He said, all right it's your turn, keep it for a while. After I had more or less exhausted everything I could think of to do with it and my boyfriend and my closest friends had exhausted what they could do, I just couldn't stand the thought of the camera sitting idle. I started to call people who I thought might be interested in working with this small format video and that's when I started producing...this is around 1971.

I knew Keith Sonnier was showing at the Leo Castelli Gallery and I started calling other artists to see if any were interested in doing something with my equipment. My thinking was very simple and stream of conscious. Keith is at Castelli, he makes tape. Richard Serra is at Castelli, he makes films, so maybe he's interested in making a video. Richard was interested and so were other people I called...people I didn't know personally. I don't how I got the gumption to make the calls. When a tape was finished I would start thinking about what I wanted to do next. I never really thought *what* do I want to do. I always thought *who* do I want to produce, which artists do I want to invite to make something on video.

I spent four years or so calling people, inviting them to make videos. Eventually I received funding from the NYSCA for my production company, Fifi Corday Productions. I got what I thought was a decent camera, not a portable camera, but what was called a small format studio camera and a half-inch deck. Having that camera and some money, I was able to invite people to do things that were a bit more ambitious.

A related ambition—to broadcast artists' videos on television—was encouraged by the arrival of television's cable delivery system. During the same time that Carlota Schoolman was independently producing single channel tapes, she was programming artists' videos for the newly established public access channels of cable television.

Carlota Schoolman: I started to use the public access television channels under the auspices of Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.) and a few years later I was doing it on my own. That was an interesting thing to do. When you put work on public access, it's a little bit like a black hole. You don't have any idea of who is watching, you don't get much feedback. Also, because cable was so new most of the artists' neighborhoods—not considered to be residential—weren't yet wired for cable. I would organize screenings at some bar that had cable, like Max's Kansas City uptown location and a little place that used to be on the corner of Bleecker Street and LaGuardia. I would advertise when the series would be running, and people would attend and it became a community.

Communities formed and reformed in the process of artists' reclaiming and building anew the neighborhoods that became SoHo and Tribeca. These inner-city ghost towns being vacated by light industry went quiet after six o'clock when the dwindling businesses closed and the streets, with scant evidence of neighborhood stores and services, were trafficked mostly by artists. *The Early Show* is place-specific by virtue of nearly everyone living and working in these two contiguous neighborhoods. Into those quiet-after-six o'clock streets where artists' sweat equity was creating residences and studios, galleries were migrating from uptown and alternative exhibition spaces were coming into being. In such compact, geo-based quarters there was confluence and exchange between artists of different disciplines, as there was between neighborhood-based institutions. An example: The Kitchen, an alternative space founded by artists Steina and Woody Vasulka and where Carlota Schoolman was video curator (1974 - 1977), was initially a sponsored project under the fiscal and administrative umbrella of Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), one of the first institutions to collect and distribute artist-made videos, as it continues to do.

Lori Zippay, EAI director, interviewed on October 20, 2005: In 1969 Howard Wise mounted an exhibition at his gallery called *TV as a Creative Medium*, recognized as the first exhibition in the US devoted to video as an art form. Twelve artists were in the show. What I think is fascinating is that at that early time, 1969, the works were so diverse *and* they addressed problematics that are still part of the equation...single channel video, performance, installation.

That show became a catalyst. Howard Wise realized there needed to be a new paradigm. The gallery system really couldn't handle this new kind of work in the way he wanted to handle it. It was one thing to exhibit video work. But in terms of selling and representing the work...it didn't fit the gallery model. This is the moment of alternative spaces and of all kinds of art that didn't fit the traditional gallery model—land art, site specific art, and installations. And here was one more form—video—that didn't fit the model. And here was a commercial gallerist acknowledging this and deciding to start a new paradigm.

Wise closed his gallery after the closing of his show, *TV as a Creative Medium*, and he founded EAI (Electronic Arts Intermix) as a not-for-profit institution. The original mission was to foster projects in this emergent medium. Visionary is an overused word but in this case the term visionary really does apply.

By 1973 we had the collection underway and people working on the collection. Even before there was a collection at EAI there was an editing facility. Then in 1973, growing out of the editing facility, a core of artists said we need a way to show this work and, so, the distribution service started. Educational rentals were our main outlet for a long time. Now it's museums for exhibitions and

purchases. There's an analogy to jazz. As an American art form, jazz musicians had to go to Europe to make money and be recognized. Even in our earliest days we were working with institutions in France, Japan, and Germany, heavily in Europe. Video was very integrated into the museum art world in Europe in the 1970s. We actually had EAI reps in Europe and Japan in the 1970s. There were a few key individuals in the US who were very influential and working in institutions...David Ross, John Hanhardt and Barbara London, to name a few examples. But things have really changed in the last ten years. Whereas earlier the work was marginalized, now video art and media art are integrated into the landscape of art all over the world. It's a completely new landscape for us.

In this period (1969-1979) it felt wide open with many diverse projects coming under one heading: performance, synthesizer work, women's video work...all part of an alternative practice, maybe part of a counterculture. The work was valid but could not be supported by a commercial entity and had to be supported by the paradigm of a non-profit agency. EAI has been able to survive, to change and adapt. I don't think the kind of organization we were then, supporting such an eclectic and loosely defined range of alternative projects and experiments could exist now.

Clearly, a good deal of the activity surrounding early video was a grass roots enterprise. Production, exhibition and distribution were propelled from the ground up by the initiative of downtown community members. *Avalanche* magazine, co-founded by Liza Bear and Willoughby Sharp, is a telling example of such enterprise.

Liza Bear: We never got financing; we never had a schedule. We didn't organize *Avalanche* like a business. We were so picky about the way everything looked, that even the ads were designed by us. It took a lot more time. The second issue was going to be 138 pages. That wasn't realistic financially. I thought we could divide the material into two or three issues but Willoughby has a curatorial bent and thought all the work was related and couldn't be divided. We would have to raise ten thousand dollars. That meant getting grants and eventually we gave the ten thousand to the printer. Otherwise we wouldn't get the material returned to us.

For thirteen issues between 1970 and 1976 *Avalanche* concentrated on performance, installation, earthwork, conceptual art and video. Each issue featured an artist on the cover and an in-depth interview. This important journal is one of the vital materials collected for and exhibited as part of *The Early Show*.

Special thanks are owed to Jean-Noel Herlin for loaning copies of *Avalanche* and many more pieces of valuable ephemera he managed to salvage and preserve in the Jean-Noel Herlin Archive Project. Thanks also to EAI/Lori Zippay and Carlota Schoolman who loaned material from their archives, and to all the exhibiting artists who contributed to this idea of making visible something of the moment through such materials as storyboards, scripts, posters, pages from notebooks, sketches and announcements from their personal archives. A rather substantial artifact in the exhibition, a Portapak AV 2000, was loaned by Ralph Hocking and Sherry Miller Hocking with many thanks.

Eleven works in the exhibition were produced by Carlota Schoolman (Fifi Corday Productions). Her archive includes seldom seen work, including untitled performances of Gordon Matta-Clark and Hannah Wilke from *Soup and Tart*, an evening salon of food and art curated by artist Jean Dupuy for The Kitchen

in 1974. The three cameras Schoolman arranged to record *Soup and Tart* have turned the evening of real-time works into something a bit less ephemeral than vanished, one time only performances. Even video works, especially early single channel tapes, are ephemeral, to the extent that these works do not reside in the consciousness of a public as do works that have long found residence in museums and books, display and reproduction.

My interest has been in exhibiting early video works in a context of contemporaneous artifacts and reflections about the period. Artists who made only a few video works and remained productive in other areas of visual art, artists who made only a few video works and disappeared into other careers, artists who maintained long careers as makers of video based works, very different kinds of artists appear in *The Early Show*, most engaging with time-based images for the first time. The exhibition reflects that the moment of video's emergence is composed of both revered and less well-known video pioneers. We are fortunate to be showing a number of rarely seen works, among them Keith Sonnier's 1977 *Send/Receive: Phase II*, the first video work to use satellite technology; Mary Lucier's 1974 *Fire Writing* with its original spoken text; and Bill Wegman and Tony Oursler have given us access to their early, unexhibited works.

The Early Show has one of its origins in the work and legacy of Carlota Schoolman. The exhibition also originated with the support of Sanford Wurmfield and subsequently, the Gallery Committee. And we are grateful to jWin Electronics Corporation for the DVD players and headphones used in the exhibition.

Locating and preparing tapes for the exhibition, scanning images for the catalogue and the gallery presentation, assisting with artists' interviews and designing the exhibition—really all aspects of *The Early Show*—depended on the participation of graduate students enrolled in my Early Video Seminar. I am grateful for the hard work and unflagging enthusiasm of Tania Cross, Christopher Howard, Colin Kim, Rachel Leibowitz, Justin Matherly, Andrea Merkx, Lauren O'Neill-Butler, Rotem Ruff and Hugh Walton. Through their efforts, they obtained an EAB grant towards publicity for this exhibition.

As a first time curator I benefited from the help and guidance of Tracy L. Adler, Curator of the Hunter College Art Galleries, and her capable staff, Sarah Archino and Phi Nguyen. I am also grateful to Tim Laun for his design of the invitation and catalogue for *The Early Show*.

The generosity of the artists has been remarkable and I am immensely grateful.

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